DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 286 943 TM 870 611

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TITLE Measurement Implications of "A Nation at Risk." ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, and Evaluation, Princeton, N.J.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE [85]
CONTRACT 400-86-0018
NOTE 4p.; ERIC/TME Update Series.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, and Evaluation, Educational Testing Service, Princeton, NJ 08541-0001 (free).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Educational Testing; Elementary Secondary Education; Measurement Objectives; *National Competency Tests; Standardized Tests; *Test Construction; *Testing Problems; Test Use
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; *National Commission on Excellence in Education; *Nation at Risk (A)

ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest discusses implications derived from the final report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, "A Nation at Risk." The first implication is a motivational one for measurement specialists: it is an ego-booster. The report is replete with results yielded from various testing programs, the fruit of the measurement specialist's work. A second implication is that the measurement community will deal effectively with the myriad of typical testing problems, such as validity, reliability, and norms. A third implication consists of a host of highly specific matters which measurement specialists must anticipate. Some of these include an upsurge in standardized testing at the high school level and a resurgence of interest in standardized tests in content areas. The report also contains a curiously worded call for a nation-wide (but not federal) system of state and local standardized tests. The commission seems content to rely on existing mechanisms for the creation and distribution of both tests and textbooks, while concentrating on recommendations for improvement of their quality and use. (LMO)

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ERIC DIGESTS

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement,
and Evaluation, Educational Testing Service,
Princeton, New Jersey

1985

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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UPDATE

MEASUREMENT IMPLICATIONS OF "A NATION AT RISK"

by
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"A Nation at Risk," the final report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, is a slim volume—the main body of the report is a mere 31, not very tightly packed, pages. It represents the outcome of deliberations involving 18 months of meetings, about three-quarter of a million dollars in costs, some 40 commissioned papers in addition to the untold number of extant papers consulted, and testimony provided by hundreds of individuals from every level of education, business, and government. Following its own advice to students, the Commission did quite a bit of homework. Now, as is true with students' homework, the question is: What are the results?

One may attempt to answer this question from a variety of perspectives. For example, did the Commission accomplish its charges? What are the implications for universities? For elementary schools? What are the important variables which the Commission chose not to address?

Here, however, we will concentrate on only one perspective, namely the field of measurement. What are the report's implications for the field of measurement and measurement specialists? There are, I believe, three principal implications from this perspective. The first is a motivational one. At a minimum, the report should give the measurement specialist an ego-boost. If you, as a measurement specialist, ever wondered if anybody did care, or ever will care, about your work, the report should lay your doubts to rest. The report is replete with results yielded from various testing programs, the fruit of the measurement specialist's work. In fact, the fires of national consciousness regarding an educational crisis probably have been fueled more by test results than by all other sources of information combined. Further, the report calls for more testing: more frequent testing, more kinds of tests in more different fields, and paying more attention to test results. Testing plays a prominent role in the Commission's plans for remedying the currently perceived problem—heady prospects for the measurement field.

A second implication from a measurement perspective is a more sobering one, an antidote of sorts for the first implication. In calling for increased use of and reliance on testing, the report does not acknowledge the myriad of measurement problems lurking in the background. What problems? Nothing special, just the traditional problems of validity, reliability, setting standards, norms, and so on. But calling the problems "traditional" makes them no less real, no less difficult. I choose to think that, rather than being unaware of these problems, the Commission had confidence that the measurement community could handle them, both in professionally prepared tests and in training teachers to prepare their own tests. Thus, a substantial responsibility is thrust upon the measurement community.

A third implication from a measurement perspective consists of a host of highly specific matters which measurement specialists must anticipate, if indeed the report has any impact. Without attempting an exhaustive list, I will name a few of these. Because of the Commission's preoccupation with high school education, there should be an upsurge in standardized testing at the high school level, traditionally an after-thought to the elementary school testing program. There may be a resurgence of interest in standardized tests in the "content" areas: biology, algebra, foreign language, and so on.

TM 870 611

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TESTS MEASUREMENT EVALUATION

Test constructors have for the past 10 to 15 years devoted much care to assuring sufficient "bottom" in their tests, without overmuch concern about the "top." It appears that the "top" will need to make a comeback. Measures of teaching quality will probably flourish (with what validity remains to be seen).

The report also contains a curiously worded call for a nation-wide (but not federal) system of state and local standardized tests. The report does not suggest what is meant by a "system." There is no evidence that the Commission was calling for the creation of some new organization or some kind of a supertest. Rather, when speaking about tests and textbooks, which are addressed in the same section of the report, the Commission seems content to rely on existing mechanisms for the creation and distribution of both tests and texts, while concentrating on recommendations for improvement of their quality and use. The general context of the report suggests that the "system" referred to is best thought of as a pattern of activity rather than some specific entity.

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Office of Educational Research and Improvement U.S. Department of Education

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education under contract no. 400-86-0018. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or The Department of Education.